

April 26, 2007 Minutes

MINUTES

STAFFORD COUNTY

CABLE TELEVISION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

April 26, 2007

I. Call to Order.

The meeting was called to order by Tom Gregory, vice chairman, at 7:10 p.m. in the Administrator's Conference Room in the Administration Center, 1300 Courthouse Road.

II. Roll Call.

The following members were present: Tom Gregory, Terry Lottes, Danielle Davis and John Johnson. Also present were Matthews Drewery with Cox Communications, Marie Schuler with Comcast Communications, and Cathy Riddle and Michele Lansford representing the County.

III. Presentations by the Public.

Terry and Paula Menteer (107 Ivywood Drive), James Sthresley (106 Scarsdale Drive), and David Stumpf (109 Ivywood Drive), residents in the Heritage Oaks Subdivision, filed a complaint with the committee and Marie Schuler: they contend that Comcast subcontractors installed underground cable outside the proper utility easement. They said that there is no record of an easement where the work was completed.

Ms. Schuler responded that a "private" easement would not have been recorded, and that the original easement (where the initial cable was installed) probably falls into this category.

Mr. Stumpf said that certain utilities are located behind the homes (the area in contention), but that the original cable was strung on poles in that area. He objects to the "adverse possession" scenario that could result from the location of the new underground cable. All residents in attendance said they were in danger of losing their property to the cable company if the fiber remains where it is.

Mr. Sthresley said there has been a cable line behind the homes since the late 1980s, but that the companies kept moving it over the years. He said that he also objects to any potential to cede land to Comcast.

Ms. Schuler said she would investigate the matter. Mr. Stumpf provided her with a plat of the neighborhood for reference. Mr. Gregory asked her to report back to the committee at the May 2007 meeting.

Mr. Johnson, in whose district the neighborhood is located, asked Mr. Gregory to accompany him to the site – Mr. Gregory agreed.

Pat Howard, 49 Windsor Way, is a Comcast customer. He told the committee that he is experiencing consistent service interruptions and poor reception, especially on the high definition channels, and slow Internet service. He provided a CD to the vice chair and Ms. Schuler detailing his calls and e-mails to Comcast, and records of signal strength. He said the problems are worst in the evenings.

Ms. Schuler said his difficulties are a sign of signal weakness. She said the “hard line” cause needs to be traced back to the source of the problem.

Mr. Gregory asked her to report back to the committee at the May 2007 meeting about the actions the company takes to resolve the issue.

IV. Agenda Additions.

There were no additions to the agenda.

V. New Business.

Mr. Gregory told Mr. Johnson that the committee is finalizing plans to request that the Board of Supervisors designate the group as a “telecommunications commission” that will work on expanding Wi-Fi and Internet services in the County.

VI. Approval of Minutes.

Mr. Lottes moved, and Ms. Davis seconded, to approve the minutes of the February 22, 2007 meeting. The minutes were approved by acclamation.

VII. Members’ Concerns.

Ms. Riddle reported that the members’ contact information is available on the County’s Web site, as well as on Channel 17. Meeting agendas and minutes are also available online.

Ms. Davis asked Ms. Schuler if Comcast would provide service to the Potomac Run subdivision, as requested by Marty Lemus, 206 Revell Road. Ms. Schuler responded that it would be cost-prohibitive to build to that street because it doesn’t meet the density requirement of 20 homes per mile. She reported that service to 113 Norman Road (Warren-Jensrud residence) would also be cost-prohibitive. She said Comcast is, however, exploring the likelihood of providing service to areas with less density.

Ms. Davis said she had talked to Mr. Lemus since the March 2007 meeting about service to his area. Ms. Schuler said his development is 6.4 miles from the “end of the line.” She said she would call Mr. Lemus and tell him how many customers Comcast would need in order to get a return on their investment.

Mr. Lottes asked when Comcast will install cable in his neighborhood. Ms. Schuler replied that the company is designing the system for that area now, and it should be completed no later than the third quarter of 2007.

Mr. Johnson asked if Comcast would be providing VOIP (Internet phone) services. Ms. Schuler said that option will be available to customers after the company certifies that every node in the County will support E-911 calls.

Ms. Davis asked if Mr. Warren Lee, 1566 Truslow Road, received a correction to his bill for a \$19.00 charge for work on equipment located along his street. Ms. Schuler replied that he had received a credit.

Ms. Davis asked about service to Mr. Walsky on Windemere Drive, and Ms. Schuler said that this is another area that does not meet the density requirement.

Ms. Davis said she talked to Paula Mendoza on Antietam Loop who requested a bill adjustment because of slow Internet service and poor television reception. Ms. Mendoza said the problem is worst on Thursdays and Fridays, and that the work technicians have done to date has not helped.

Ms. Davis said residents in Aquia Harbour have been experiencing slow Internet service and cable outages. Ms. Schuler said Carles Helmandollar told her the technicians couldn't pinpoint the cause. Ms. Davis will provide the names and phone numbers of affected residents so Ms. Schuler can contact them directly. Ms. Schuler said she will have someone inspect the nodes in the Harbour. Mr. Gregory commented that it could be a problem with the cable, and it might have to be replaced.

Mr. Gregory noted that Comcast rates have increased significantly since the franchise agreement was executed. He said he received a notice of channel shifts, and questioned if the change was what subscribers would want. He said two channels he watches are only available on one television set because of the change. Ms. Schuler told the committee that one of their broadcasters, Megahertz Broadcast Systems Ltd., requested the change. She said that subscribers could get converter boxes for additional television sets.

Ms. Schuler announced that all Comcast programming will be transmitted in digital format beginning in February 2009. Mr. Gregory asked if Comcast will offer a mechanism to convert analog signals to digital. Ms. Schuler said cable companies are discussing the issue with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), but that the commission may not allow companies to "down convert" signals back to analog.

Ms. Schuler and Mr. Drewery told the committee that they had coordinated efforts to streamline their respective customer service reports and ensure that the reports show similar information.

The Comcast report reflected a high rate of "abandoned" calls, and Ms. Schuler said that was because customer databases and call centers are in the process of being moved to new locations. The company plans to add 150 customer service representatives. The increase in dropped calls in March 2007 was a result of the rate increase.

Ms. Davis told Ms. Schuler that she would like to compliment one of the employees (name unknown) in the office on Route 610 who consistently provides excellent customer service.

Mr. Gregory said he thought the recent Comcast rate increases were significant, especially for stand-alone Internet service. He said his bill increased from approximately \$40.00 to almost \$60.00. Ms. Schuler said the rates were adjusted according to Comcast's business model, and that there is a discount for Internet service when it's bundled with cable television programming.

Mr. Lottes said he was also concerned about the rate increase, and asked if the companies would consider a senior citizen discount.

Mr. Johnson asked if the most recent increase was the first one since the franchise was signed. Ms. Schuler said rates were raised in October 2006 for the addition of the Mid-Atlantic Sports Network.

Mr. Gregory asked if Comcast rates are uniform throughout the region. Ms. Schuler replied that they are not, that the company uses an FCC formula to set rates, and that Comcast is trying to equalize charges for all subscribers.

Mr. Drewery presented Cox's customer service report. Mr. Lottes noted that there was still a discrepancy between calls answered in 48 hours and installs completed within three days. Mr. Drewery said he and Ms. Schuler will work to further standardize the reports.

Ms. Schuler said that if a customer requests installation one week out, they don't count that as falling in the three-day timeframe. Mr. Drewery said that Cox does.

Mr. Gregory said he doesn't get complaints about installations, but does hear from constituents that the time they spend on hold when they call the companies is too long.

VIII. Adjournment.

At 8:40 p.m., Ms. Davis moved to adjourn the meeting; Mr. Johnson seconded; the motion passed unanimously.